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ABSTRACT

Every individual's needs will differ, and a unit/credit system must be designed with sufficient flexibility to ensure that whatever the individual's interest in language learning, the system caters to it. The thesis of this paper is that, while a grammatical approach to language teaching cannot cater to it, a communicative approach can. A communicative approach asks essentially two questions: What are the types of language interaction in which the individual is going to engage and with what purpose? This goes beyond asking what the situations are in which the individual will find himself needing the language, although situational dimensions are important. Whereas the grammatical approach derives a teaching program from the form that utterances have in a particular language, the communicative approach is concerned essentially with the content of utterances. The paper further discusses the value and advisability of considering this approach when formulating a syllabus. (Author)

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"A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION IN ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNING"

by D. A. WILKINS

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The conventional approach to the design of foreign language courses is largely a process of taking the global language, breaking it down into digestible chunks and ordering them into a sequence that is intended to facilitate acquisition. The refinement of language teaching materials has resulted from an increasingly explicit recognition of the criteria employed in arriving at the pedagogic structure and a deepening awareness of the nature of language as a consequence of advances in linguistic science. The production of course books and course materials is now more objectively undertaken and has a more principled basis than would have been true in the past. The principles to be followed are set out in teachers' manuals and in books on methodology. They make reference to such notions as relative simplicity, frequency, range, utility, contrastive difficulty, and so on. This still leaves room for the author to exercise his individuality, but he is unlikely to be thought successful unless at the same time what he produces falls in with these generally accepted principles.

Both the course producer and the teacher will usually identify the chunks in linguistic terms and linguistically usually means grammatically. Sometimes a learning unit is devoted to a particular pronunciation difficulty or to the acquisition of some vocabulary items, but it is the grammatical content that is thought of as the core of a course and the essence of learning a language is taken to be the learning of its grammar. We commonly identify a particular lesson or part of a lesson by saying: "That's the lesson that deals with the Instrumental (or "The Perfective", or "Second Conjugation Verbs" ...)." The same is the case whether we are concerned with modern or traditional courses. Although the forms of the language may be distributed rather differently in the two cases and although the methods used may differ radically, an underlying assumption is shared - that is, that the learner's task is to be principally identified with the mastery of the grammatical devices that the language employs. In this sense, therefore, I think it is true to say that a large proportion of language courses are based on a grammatical approach to language teaching.

While it would be absurd to deny that some learners have developed an entirely acceptable language proficiency through courses having an essentially grammatical syllabus, there are grounds for thinking that such an approach is not necessarily the most effective in at least some language learning situations. In broad terms the argument is that the grammatical syllabus takes insufficient account of the fact that language is a means of communication. Languages are not learned for their own sakes but because they enable the learner to communicate something to others or to comprehend what others themselves wish to communicate. This inadequacy shows itself in a number of different ways.

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In the first place there are certain linguistic shortcomings. It is often not realised that even where an individual develops a practical mastery of the grammatical system, he does not necessarily have the ability to exploit that mastery in actual acts of communication. This is because the use of a sentence and its grammatical meaning are by no means always the same thing. A grammatically declarative sentence may be used as a question. An interrogative may act as an exclamation:

What are teachers for but to teach?

An imperative can be used for directions:

Take a 73 bus to Oxford Street.

The learner may know the word warning, but does he know how to warn? He may know the word invitation, but does he know how to invite? Learning has commonly stopped short at the grammatical system itself without ensuring that the learner knows how to apply this system. The assumption has presumably been either that the learner could work out the way the grammatical system was used for himself, or that use is much the same in all languages (this is not often the case), or that use itself could not be systematically learned. Whatever the reason, the result is that learners who have gained some fluency and accuracy in their command of the grammatical system in the classroom find that they cannot transfer this ability into actual performance in the face of the communicative demands put on them by real-life situations.

Another linguistic point is that there is often an inadequate match between the type of language that is taught and that which will be demanded by the uses to which the learner will be putting the language. If the content is identified in grammatical terms, there is a tendency for the learner to be taken bit by bit through virtually the entire grammatical system. Things are taught because they are there, not because they particularly suit the learner's needs. As a consequence some of what is learned is superfluous and the learning process is thereby rendered less efficient.

One effect of a grammatical approach is that it is sentences of similar structure that are brought together in any one unit rather than sentences having a high probability of co-occurrence in real life. In natural speech and writing a sequence of utterances will be structurally heterogeneous but thematically related. The sentences of many courses are structurally related but thematically heterogeneous. Whatever the method, therefore, it would be difficult to make any claim of "naturalness" for the materials if the organisation was basically grammatical.

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There is, therefore, an intrinsic artificiality in materials which have a grammatical specification. How far such artificiality impedes the process of learning is perhaps a matter for debate. However, it is possible to argue that the learner cannot be expected to master the communicative use of sentences in real utterances, if he is exposed to those sentences only under conditions that obscure the relationships between sentences in natural speech.

Whether or not the artificiality is serious from a linguistic point of view, it does illustrate why it is that the learner's motivation is sustained with difficulty when a course has a grammatical approach. It is not easy for the learner to see what practical return there is going to be for his investment in learning when what he is asked to produce and listen to does not resemble natural language use. He is in effect invited to suspend his critical faculties and accept that all will come right in the end. He must be convinced that although he cannot use what he is learning at the time, it is contributing to a knowledge that he will eventually be able to use. Many, perhaps most, learners are unable to maintain their motivation in these circumstances. In any case it is not uncommon for the learner to be in a position where he does need to use the language even while he is in the process of learning it. The grammatical approach does not prepare him very well for this.

Since, particularly in the case of adults, the learner frequently has a clear understanding of his purpose in learning the language and a clear picture of the situations in which he is likely to want to use it, his doubts as to the relevance of what he is learning will be reinforced if he is taught language that does not suit his needs.

It is worth bearing in mind that language learning is now being undertaken by a larger proportion of the population than was the case in the past and that this creates new conditions which we must meet by changing our approaches to teaching. Languages are no longer to be learned by an elitist group for whom favourable conditions have been created and who have received social support in their learning. If it is true that a grammatical approach has been successful with some learners, it is because they were a privileged section of the population. The same approaches are unlikely to be successful with the larger number of learners who do not bring the same advantages with them to the task of learning a language. For them, personal motivation is likely to be a more important factor. The design of courses should aim to exploit and sustain what motivation they have. In this, a major role can be played by the fact that what is being learned has evident value for the purpose of communication. Courses based on a grammatical syllabus may well not be effective in doing this.

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These general arguments seem to apply with particular strength to adult language learners of the type we are concerned with. Some of them will previously have been taught a foreign language as part of their general school education, perhaps without great success. Others may not have had a type of education that included foreign languages at all. In the former case the learner will be looking for an approach to language learning that is not simply a repetition of what he experienced in school. He may well associate a grammatical approach with a sterile and unduly academic idea of education. In the latter case the learner is likely to be looking for a quick return for his learning effort and may not have sufficient understanding of the nature of language to see any benefit at all in grammatically organised learning. What both will be looking for, whether consciously or unconsciously, is an approach that derives not from the target language itself but from their personal needs. By needs is meant not only narrowly professional needs, but social needs, leisure needs and needs arising from the importance of the individual developing his personality to its full potential. Broadly speaking, these are the varied needs that arise from a person's desire to interact with others in a particular language community. Every individual's needs will differ and a unit/credit system must be designed with sufficient flexibility to ensure that whatever the individual's interest in language learning, the system caters for it. The thesis of this paper is that, whereas a grammatical approach to language teaching cannot cater for it, what we may call a communicative approach can.

A communicative approach asks essentially two questions. What are the types of language interaction in which the individual is going to engage and with what purpose? This goes beyond asking what the situations are in which the individual will find himself needing the language, although situational dimensions are important, as we shall see.

Whereas the grammatical approach derives a teaching programme from the form that utterances have in a particular language, the communicative approach is concerned essentially with the content of utterances. The descriptions of grammarians and linguists have over the centuries provided us with a language for talking about language form. We lack an equivalent meta-language for talking about its content. As a starting-point, therefore, we need a set of categories in terms of which we can identify a learner's language needs. As a result of such an analysis a set of objectives can be specified from which a teaching programme can be derived. In my paper The linguistic and situational content of the common core in a unit credit system (CCC/EES (72) 67) I have attempted to put forward a framework of categories which could be used in making such an analysis. The categories can be broadly divided into two types.

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The first are those which can be used in defining what might be called the informational content of utterances, such as Time, Quantity and Space. In general the categories in this section are expressed in most (Indo-) European languages by means of the grammatical categories with which all of us are very familiar. The second are useful in defining the social function of utterances or of parts of utterances. There are broad categories such as Modality, Suasion and Emotional Relations and, within these, sub-categories such as possibility, suggestion and sympathy.

Any teaching programme is the result of a process of limitation. From all that might possibly be presented to the learner a certain limited amount is chosen for actual learning. The procedure to be followed with this framework, therefore, is to select from among the many possibilities that it offers those communicative processes in which the given learner or, more likely, class of learners is likely to engage. Depending on which of the many language learning situations one envisages, an appropriate list of language functions can be drawn up. If we envisage the tourist, the list will, no doubt, include among many others elementary notions of time and place and communicative functions such as requesting, seeking information and following directions. If we seek to meet the language needs of the university scientist we shall have to include categories of rational enquiry and exposition such as deduction, hypothesis and cause. If we were to seek to provide a minimal communicative ability for immigrant workers who would be learning the language in the country where it is normally spoken, we would ask what are the common and important social interactions in which they engage and what their linguistic functions in these interactions are. They can then be provided with a rudimentary "grammar" to meet these needs and the grammar will be a wholly relevant one, because it has been derived in the first place from the kinds of communication involved.

Any one of the categories in the notional framework will have many different linguistic realisations. There are many different ways of expressing agreement, requests, surprise, future time and so on. At this point situational considerations become important. Indeed situational dimensions have already been introduced into the three examples above. The tourist needs to follow directions rather than to give them. In some cases the scientist will need to recognise rather than produce language. To go further, some may be concerned with spoken, others with written language. There is the exact nature of the relationships between the participants in the language situation, leading perhaps to greater or lesser formality. Factors such as these often condition the precise form in which a message is expressed. By bearing in mind what is to be expressed and asking under what situational conditions it is to be expressed, one can arrive at the particular linguistic form that the learner is to acquire. From the total set of messages

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or message-types that are predicted for any group of learners a set of linguistic forms is derived which constitutes the input to the construction of teaching materials and thereby to the learner. We can describe this procedure as a communicative approach to syllabus construction, because, although the forms to be learned can still be identified in grammatical terms, they are derived in the first instance from an analysis of the communicative acts in which the learner can be expected to engage.

Nothing has been said so far about the lexical content of a language syllabus. The notional categories that I have proposed will do little to specify the lexical content. On the other hand situational considerations may be more important, since both the physical situations and the fields of activity envisaged for any group of learners may predetermine a good deal of the vocabulary that they will need. There will also often be a need for a more general vocabulary, one that is non-situational or can be used where there is no consistency in the fields of activity or situations which are envisaged for the learner. In such a case a core vocabulary such as that provided in Dr. van Ek's paper (CCC/EES (72) 72) could well be incorporated into a basically notional or communicative syllabus.

It would be as well to acknowledge two aspects of these suggestions where caution is necessary. The first relates to the present state of our knowledge. We are ignorant about the way in which many of the listed categories are actually realised in many European languages. We have very little objective evidence about how people actually express most of the communicative functions listed in the second part (pp. 15 - 23) of my paper. We can intuit fairly well some of the means that are employed but we have little objective evidence of how widely and how frequently these means are used, nor can we have any idea of what other devices speakers may regularly call upon. We must not imagine that we can obtain most of what we want to know by simple introspection.

A second point that is most important with regard to the teaching and learning of language and which may not be satisfactorily resolved until we know more about the way in which these categories are realised in real communication is that we have to avoid the danger of learning materials degenerating into something resembling phrase-books. Whatever is learned must have a considerable degree of generalisability or else what is learned will be decidedly fragmentary. This could very well mean that the more generalisable constructions will be preferred to the less generalisable and that this is a pedagogic criterion to operate alongside the criteria already mentioned. Certainly I think it is important that the grammatical content of the learning materials should be generalised beyond the context in which they are actually introduced.

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The first of these doubts can be met by giving greater prominence to natural language materials, that is, materials that have not been specially written for the learner, than is normally the case. In this way authenticity is assured and it has the added advantage that the learner is familiarised with the experience of being exposed to spoken and written language under normal conditions of use. The second point can largely be met by exercising due care in the construction of syllabuses and materials.

The advantages of the communicative approach are largely implicit in what has already been said. In the first place, we are forced to consider the communicative value of everything that we teach. We do not teach something simply because it is there. We do it, because we increase the learner's communicative capacity thereby and we do it in a way that is directly relevant to his or her own interests in learning the language. We have the means to describe the communication needs of different types of language learner, whether these needs are of a general or a more specialised character. The priorities of a course are determined by the nature of the acts of communication in which the learner can be expected to participate.

The language ability that is developed through such an approach is a communicative ability. It does not stop short at a grammatical competence and yet within it is subsumed a grammatical competence. It therefore takes account of the fact that a grammatical knowledge of language though necessary is not sufficient to enable communication to take place efficiently. In this respect it meets a frequently heard criticism of grammar-based courses.

A communicative approach is superior to a situational approach because utterances are ultimately determined by the intentions of the speaker not by the situations in which he finds himself. It can handle both those types of language event where situational features are closely related to the language produced and those where the observable situation is in no way a factor in determining the language that is produced.

From the learner's point of view the advantage is that he can see from the beginning in what way the things that he is learning relate to the need that he has or will have for the language when he is obliged to communicate through it. His satisfaction will be the greater because he will be able to see the practical benefit of what he is doing. In any case, if, as sometimes happens, he does need to use the language from the very early stages of his learning experience, he is much more likely to achieve a successful communication than would be the case with a grammatical approach, where the benefits are mostly long-term. The learner's motivation, therefore, is likely to be much more readily sustained.

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In a unit/credit system based on such an approach, the units would be identified in notional/situational terms. A further advantage of this approach would stem from the fact that the labels used to do this would not be unfamiliar to the language learner himself. Much of the language used to specify the content is of an everyday kind. It is relatively non-technical. When asked whether he wants to learn to request information, to apologise, to express gratitude in the target language, he will find an answer much easier to arrive at than if he is asked whether he wants to learn the passive. As a result there is the possibility of the learner identifying his own learning objectives and of selecting for himself what is relevant in the unit/credit system. This suggests a degree of freedom for the learner that language courses have rarely, if ever, offered.